

Educational Philosophy Today

John R. Seeley

1. A 'philosophy of education', if it means — as it has traditionally — a relatively fixed, extended and implication-heavy set of principles by which to guide practice, becomes less and less attainable, or likely to be useful if it were. Beyond a narrow statement of a few principles at a very high level of generality, little can be said applicable to the new situation.

2. The 'new situation' is almost trivialized by being assimilated to the somewhat timeworn and depreciated 'rapid social change'. The image evoked by those words involves something like a speed-up in familiar-feeling processes: a misleading image. The difference in degree entails a difference in quality.

3. Among the most important changes in the process of education, and hence the context for schooling, are the collapse or radical condensation of time, the redefinition and relocation of power, authority and responsibility, the connected changes in the nature and meaning of childhood and the consequentially different social structure, and the emergence of not merely new but different self-consciousness together with the means for its stimulation and service. The reason these require mention once more is that, while they are already much talked of — even worried to death — they seem as yet unappreciated if one may judge by the inferences that have been drawn (or failed to be drawn) from them for educational theory and practice.

4. What we now have — or are on the eve of having — is a situation in which society, persons, and appropriately perceived problems are, in their most important respects, radically transformed, not merely from generation to generation, but from semi-generation to semi-generation or faster. Thus, whatever was appropriate education — with reference either to content or method — for the high school or college student of ten or 15 years ago is no longer appropriate. In fact, it may well be counter-educative today.

5. Nor do I mean this in the relatively trivial sense that curriculum (and method) must be 'up-dated', because the logistical growth of knowledge has added a great deal, and shown much to be in error. (By itself, this might be coped with, though probably only by making it possible and palatable for all teachers to become also students at least half their time. This, in turn, would require a radical alteration in the character-structure, reward-system, reference-group and social organization of many of them, if not most; but even that is relatively easy.)

John R. Seeley is dean of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in Santa Barbara, California. He was formerly chairman of the sociology department at Brandeis University.



Eleanor Magid



6. I mean that each successive wave of 'students' (and hence also, ultimately, of teachers) is so radically different, that the crucial problems in and for education are ever radically fresh. What might be called 'system-properties' fade into insignificance as problems in comparison with historic properties — properties of radical novelty on both sides as *this* tribe of teachers — (the 1940 tribe, the 1950 tribe, the 1960 tribe) faces *that* tribe of students. Of course, something may be said of inter-tribal intercourse, but it will carry us not very far toward any effective parley.

7. The appropriate image may once have been that of journeyman and apprentice, master and disciple, 'teacher', as we say, and 'pupil'. All those images rest on a preponderant sense of cultural continuity, running both ways, so that — with minor modifications — student is comprehensible to teacher because he, the student, is very like what the teacher was and approved of being; and teacher is understandable to student, because that is very like what he will be and wants to be. But what is now more nearly the case (on both sides) is more nearly caught by the image of the visiting anthropologist: each finds the other very hard to understand, each is effectively insulated against and resentful of being charged, each has an origin, fate and future quite different from the other, each would be 'naturally' hostile to the other and capable of making the hostility felt and effective, and neither can understand the other except by a sophisticated, sustained and delicate effort to enter empathetically into the culture of the other.

8. What is different is each wave strikes very deep, not only so far as culture, but so far as type-character. It is a commonplace, now, of therapeutic practice to say that we rarely encounter the classic forms of hysteria (*la grande hystérie*) that formed so large a part of the problems presented to Freud. That change, over two to three generations, allows a large bite of time for understanding to catch up with events. But my strong impression is that we are witnessing equivalent changes, now, by decades: that children born, say, ten years apart are quite differently brought up and hence quite differently constituted.

9. They are differently brought up in several senses. Differently brought up, in the sense that the very character-structure is sizably altered: the degree of and balance between shame, guilt and anxiety; the characteristic and preferred defenses and defense systems; the amount, source and locus of internal conflict; the preferred resolution or maintenance modes, intrapersonal and interpersonal; the libidinal investments in fantasies, and internal and external, familial and nonfamilial, objects of love and hate; the self-image, general (what it is to be a person) and particular (what it is to be me); the ego-ideal, and the very vision of the place and function of an ego-ideal, and the investment appropriate therein; and, even more radically, attitudes toward what it *is* to be neurotic (or 'hung up') and hence what the problem is, and hence what is the appropriate mobilization and disposal of energies for various uses. Even further,

there appear to be sizable changes, decade by decade, at nonsuperficial levels, in highly cathected definitions of what it is to be a man at all, what it is to be a man rather than a woman, and what is the normative, desired and desirable degree of difference between men and women, and the desired nature and use of the bridges that are to span the differences desired and educed.

10. It is not only that the formative experiences are different in their bearing on the — in a sense, 'mute' — character structure. But that, *pari passu*, under the already attained new conditions, the personal and shared consciousness of what is afoot (including the awareness of historicity rather than systemicity) changes rapidly, both in degree, and in what it is that is grasped. There is not only change in character-formation, character and culture, but in consciousness of the change and the difference.

11. Thus, both the 'social structure' and the 'culture' of the successive waves of persons are sufficiently different to raise all the questions of communication across cultural barriers, not in the old-fashioned sense that there are difficulties of understanding between those who are 'there' and those who are not there yet, but in the new sense that there are profound problems of communication between two cultures. The 'cultures' of the successive waves are not early and late stages of the same thing, but presumably viable alternative ways of life — indeed, alternatives each wave intends to *make* prevail. So far as there is at all a cultural 'succession', it is in temporal reversal: the older trying to guess and readapt their culture to what they take to be the emerging shape of that of the young. And this perhaps for the very good reason that each new wave may indeed represent an enhanced appreciation, a more adequate understanding and a larger, as well as a more generous, grasp of living, love, and life.

12. This regeneration each decade-generation of, in effect, novel personalities in a substantially disjunct culture, supported by a separated society (rather than, properly, a 'sub-society') makes for two other novel circumstances in the setting of the school's problem. First, the school's preferred procedure of Divide and Govern, of dealing by preference, with predominantly competitive, 'atomic' 'individuals', is quite unavailable and unavailing. And second, teachers can no longer count upon, as motive, a tradition in which pupils are drawn forward by the believed-in excitements and enlargements of 'the next stage', presented and modeled by their just-next-elders in sight. What the teacher now has to look to instead, is the development and enhancement of the culturally imminent logic and resources of each new wave, so that some considerable insight, inventiveness and social-creative competence is called for, in place of what was for earlier, luckier educators a far simpler task, essentially one of induction into a culture largely given, and given alike for both.

13. The essential source of this continuous discontinuity is not at all

the technology (if by that we mean the means whereby material goods are produced), nor the resultant rapid alteration of the conditions of production, as the term is ordinarily intended. The primary source of such dizzying social and cultural change is 'social science' itself, and its offspring — using that term to represent the certainly more rapid and sometimes more reliable 'feedback' that man has brought into existence to report, albeit partially, with tremendously increased range and penetration, on what it is that man is doing to man, and what man is and is becoming as a consequence. The intended *remedy* for our being psychologically disoriented and socially 'lost', becomes here the primary *cause* of our being more acutely both — particularly if we are separated even by short intervals of historic time.

14. Parents (themselves differently brought up) employ in each decade, sometimes on their own successive children, quite different child-raising methods, while simultaneously conveying still other disjunct messages, consciously and unconsciously, by word and gesture. The process is incredibly complicated and productive of a severalty of societies. Since the child is caught up in his peer and public life in yet another set of authenticated gospels of ultimate things, we should expect, as indeed we find, far-reaching and *fundamental* differences between children reared even so little as five years apart. As such facts become themselves the new nucleus of the unexamined commonsense presumptions as to what it is to be a person (or child, adolescent, adult, parent, and the like), the problems of 'intergenerational communication' make ecumenic conferences look like child's play, as indeed they may turn out to be.

15. But there is a further fatal division in defining what the intergenerational communication, if it could be had, is to be for or about. Formal education in Western society has been under — has been taken to imply — two rather radically different major mandates. One heads up in what is called 'manpower procurement'. The object thus defined is, as efficiently as possible, to cut, pare, trim, shape and package people to fill what are aptly called 'slots', so that the human 'products' can be subsequently 'slotted-in', with as little 'wastage' as may be. The slots are taken as given. And the alleged justification for the procedure is to provide for 'the needs of the society' — whatever that silly but conclusive phrase may mean. These alleged social needs are set over against what underlies the other and contradictory mandate: to see to or care for the needs (or rights) of 'the individual'. (In case of conflict, the second, it is assumed, must yield to the first.) Thus the assigned 'task of education' is to hack away at the child until he fits into at least one of the predetermined shapes, while 'attending to his needs' (both the natural ones, and presumably the ones growing out of the routine surgery being performed upon him) by the provision of counseling, football, 'interest clubs', gripe sessions, a simulated air of personal interest and warmth (despite the overarching scheme of man-manufacture) in the classroom, and other 'compensatory' gimmicks, schemes and devices.

16. In the better schools and colleges some further attempt at recon-

ciliation may be made: more commonly, by taking a more relaxed view of what 'society' requires, and *then* assuming that what is allegedly good for society is good for the person; more rarely, very rarely indeed, by proceeding on the assumption that what is good for the person *must* be held to be good for society. (The second formulation is still bad and wrong, but it does carry the burden of the more humane and sensible impulses.)

17. We ought not to have to treat seriously any longer the manpower-procurement, manning-table model, except as a quaint though vicious survival. For insofar as it was a constraint laid upon education, it had as its historic locus the period between abysmal poverty for most (when such things as manpower-procurement *must* be left to take care of themselves) and the period of potential mountainous affluence for most (when such things may and *should* be so left). Since we are in or on the verge of the second state, even though we seem increasingly obsessed by the thinking appropriate to the first, let me turn to the true task of an education appropriate to the times.

18. The tasks of a formal education proper to our time and the future are, as indicated, to see to, encourage the co-emergence and enhancement of mind, self, society, history and culture. Mind is what, subjectively, minds, and, objectively, what matters. All that minds or matters is mind. And all that enhances what minds and matters is education. By enhancement is to be understood 'building up'. The term 'building up' is, perhaps, and perhaps necessarily, vague enough, but the sense intended is not that in which a building is built up toward a foreknown and preselected plan, but rather the sense in which a poem, a good love affair or a good life builds up toward an ever-open, potentially ever self-transcendent, ever culminating nonconclusion.

19. It must be evident that such a building up — co-emergently, again, of mind, self, society, culture, history — can no longer proceed as it has done in the past. For then, even in the relatively modern era, even under circumstances of relatively rapid social change, the theme, as it were, dominated the variations. Within rather narrow, certainly narrower, limits, the main lines of the play, the main dispositions and roles of the players, the balances between act, agency and scene, could be educatedly guessed at, the historic tasks or necessities were or seemed to be enduring and virtually self-evident; at least, all were sufficiently given that, while the educator even then might not properly fully fashion the emergent, he might 'train him up' to a very high point and safely leave him to continue therein. Our present problems are not like that.

20. Our present problems require at least that the principles guiding schooling — what has been called 'educational philosophy' — operate at a higher level of abstraction and define or guide an essentially different operation. If we are dealing each time with another society (as we now are with reference to our students), we must learn the arts of

parley and negotiation, rather than the tricks of administration and the methods of government. We no longer have 'natives' to divide and govern, but a people to deal with in decency and dignity if we can, with them, find the way. If we are dealing with a different culture each time round, we must learn the ways of finding our way into that culture, while its bearers come more loosely to comprehend ours, both so that we may be permitted to do anything of any consequence at all, and that we may have at least a modicum of sense as to what it is apt for us to do. If we confront minds, in the deepest sense, differently made up, persons importantly otherwise constituted, we must learn and help them learn the difficult and delicate arts by which alien minds see into each other in ways that are enlarging and enhancing of both. And since the student's history — his ontogeny as well as the history he has experienced, the historic moment at which he stands, and the historic task of his semi-generation — is different, the school must recognize that education puts a quite new and much more difficult task at the center of all schooling.

21. What we must now vitally lead or encourage each child to discover is the particular intercept of his history with history in general: the history in which in one sense his history is caught, and in the other sense, which enfolds it. What he needs to understand in all particularity is Who am I? Who are we? And in what act am I with them — are we — engaged?

22. And by "understand," we cannot mean *know about*. For in reference to such subject-matter — mind, self, society, history, culture — merely to know about is to mistake, to put down, to disvalue, to destroy. Understanding which permits and furthers and develops the undertaking grows only out of the undertaking, in and by a full engagement in it. So that discovery flows only out of commitment, which, in turn, it enlarges, clarifies and alters. And such community as is needed to make tolerable the risks alike of commitment and the constant examination of commitments (and the dialectic growth that these in their interpenetration give rise to) flows at one level out of the identity of common commitments, or their complementarity and mutual support, or — most thinly, perhaps — out of the bare communality of intelligent commitment itself.

23. As the bearers of any two age-specific cultures confront each other, (if and when the relations among them are not those of war, hot or cold, overt or covert), the mandate upon each is to explore the other, in a tender, respectful, collaborative and perhaps mutually elaborative and enriching relation. Indeed, the educational enterprise indicated begins to bear some relation to what social research ought to be — the exploration in mutuality by people who are different, of the sources, meanings, values, 'causes' and consequences of their differences, with a view to learning from each other, in love and reason, whatever it may be empirically discovered is of value to either or both, with a view single to the benefit of both.